

Clinical and echocardiographic parameters to characterize atrial fibrillation

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Summary

The general introduction of this thesis (**chapter 1**) describes the background of atrial fibrillation (AF), explains why it is important to screen patients for atrial fibrillation, pictures the potential benefits of predicting AF progression to more sustained forms and predicting response to therapy in patients who already have the arrhythmia.

AF is the most common cardiac arrhythmia in the world. Its prevalence increases considerably with advancing age. In people older than 80 years, almost 1 out of 10 has AF. Due to aging of the “baby-boom generation” and the fact that people get older in general, it is expected that the number of patients with AF will increase tremendously within the next decades. AF may result in life-threatening complications such as ischemic stroke and heart failure. Therefore, there is a need for primary prevention by screening to detect patients at risk for the development of AF. In patients who already developed AF, knowing the factors causing progression of AF from paroxysmal to more persistent forms is essential. Treating reversible causes of AF progression may prevent the progression to sustained forms refractory to therapeutic interventions. In addition to that, we require powerful tools to predict individual response to therapy, as we have to avoid unnecessary exposure of the patient to the risks of therapy.

In the first part of this thesis, we evaluated the role of clinical parameters to characterize AF. A better characterization of AF using clinical parameters may improve treatment of the arrhythmia. In **chapter 2**, we studied the clinical characteristics and management of patients with paroxysmal AF associated with autonomic triggers. We found an autonomic trigger pattern in 33% of all patients with paroxysmal AF in the Euro Heart Survey. It is important to classify these patients correctly since successful management of autonomic AF may depend on its recognition. Our data suggest that beta-blocking drugs, sotalol, digitalis and propafenone should be avoided in vagal AF since they may exacerbate the episodes of AF. In **Chapters 3 and 4** we studied AF progression in two different cohorts. Approximately 15% of the patients had AF progression in one year. In clinical practice, one can discriminate three clinical AF types: paroxysmal AF (the episodes of the arrhythmia terminate spontaneously), persistent AF (the episodes are not self-terminating), and permanent AF (the physician decides that further attempts to restore normal sinus rhythm are useless). We found that heart failure, previous stroke or TIA, COPD, hypertension, and age were independent predictors of AF progression. We developed a new simple prediction rule to estimate the probability of AF progression in patients with paroxysmal AF: the HATCH score. Besides heart failure and hypertension, treatment strategy (rate- versus rhythm-control) was found to be an independent predictor of AF progression in the RecordAF population.

In the second part of this thesis we studied new, non-invasive, electrophysiology-derived echocardiographic parameters to identify patients vulnerable for the

development of AF. We believe that prediction of new-onset AF enables to start adequate therapy on time reducing the development of AF-related complications. The total atrial conduction time or TACT (the total time required for atrial electrical activation) is an important electrophysiological parameter. The longer TACT is, the higher the risk of developing AF. In **chapter 5** we validated a new echocardiographic technique to estimate the TACT using pulsed-wave tissue Doppler echocardiography, namely PA-TDI. In **chapter 6**, we studied the clinical and echocardiographic determinants of a prolonged TACT using PA-TDI in a large population. AF in history, hypertension, valve disease, age, body mass, diastolic dysfunction and enlarged left atrium and aortic root dimensions were independently associated with the PA-TDI interval. In **chapter 7** we evaluated the role of PA-TDI to identify subjects at risk for development of new-onset AF. PA-TDI was the strongest predictor of new-onset AF in the studied population. The longer the PA-TDI interval, the higher the incidence of new-onset AF. One could hypothesize that reducing the duration of PA-TDI (or preventing its lengthening) might improve primary and secondary prevention of AF.

In the third part of this thesis we studied new, non-invasive, electrophysiology-derived echocardiographic parameters to characterize patients during AF. As we have to avoid unnecessary exposure of the patient to the risks of therapy, we require powerful tools to determine to which therapy the patient is most likely to respond. Electrophysiology studies show that AF is associated with shortening of atrial refractoriness as represented by a reduced atrial fibrillation cycle length (AFCL). We believe that these parameters representing atrial remodeling, may help to predict arrhythmia prognosis and response to therapy. In **chapter 8** we present the concept of atrial fibrillatory wall motion as determined by tissue velocity echocardiography. Tissue velocity imaging (TVI) is a relatively new echocardiographic technique employed for non-invasive quantification and timing of local myocardial wall motion. **Chapter 9** develops these notions further. We show that the atrial fibrillatory wall motion detected with echocardiographic TVI of the left and right atrial fibrillatory wall motion closely correlates to electrophysiological parameters during AF such as AFCL. In **Chapter 10** we prospectively evaluated the relation between the atrial fibrillatory wall motion detected with echocardiographic TVI and success of electrical cardioversion (ECV) in patients with AF. We found that higher atrial fibrillatory wall velocities and longer AFCLs determined by echocardiography are associated with acute success of ECV and long term maintenance of sinus rhythm. Our data suggest that non-invasive assessment of electrophysiological, functional, and structural atrial characteristics using TVI echocardiography may be used to predict success of ECV and long term maintenance of sinus rhythm in patients with persistent AF.

Samenvatting

Boezemfibrilleren of atriumfibrilleren (AF) is de meest voorkomende hartritmestoornis ter wereld. De ritmestoornis ontstaat door een soort elektrische storing in de boezems van het hart, waardoor deze niet meer normaal kunnen samentrekken maar fibrilleren. Hoe ouder men is, hoe groter de kans op het ontwikkelen van AF. Bij patiënten boven de 80 jaar oud heeft zelfs 1 op de 10 AF. De ritmestoornis kan tot levensbedreigende complicaties leiden zoals een beroerte of hartfalen. Daarom is het essentieel om te kunnen voorspellen wie AF zal gaan ontwikkelen in de toekomst zodat behandeling vroegtijdig gestart kan worden. Als een patiënt eenmaal AF heeft ontwikkeld, is het belangrijk om te weten bij welke patiënt een “verergering” van de ritmestoornis te verwachten valt en of een behandeling zal aanslaan of niet.

In dit proefschrift wordt een nieuwe hartecho meting beschreven (PA-TDI) die bij cardiologische patiënten duidelijk gerelateerd is aan het ontwikkelen van AF. Hoe langer PA-TDI, hoe groter de kans dat een patiënt AF zal ontwikkelen. Ook is gekeken welke aandoeningen er voor zorgen dat deze PA-TDI meting langer wordt. Wellicht dat het agressief behandelen van deze aandoeningen, verlenging van PA-TDI kan voorkomen en daarmee ook het ontwikkelen van AF in de toekomst zou kunnen voorkomen.

We hebben factoren onderzocht die een aanval van AF kunnen uitlokken en zogenaamde autonome patronen hierin herkend. Deze autonome patronen kunnen ontstaan wanneer een bepaald deel van het zenuwstelsel uit balans raakt. We laten in dit proefschrift zien dat het belangrijk is om deze patronen te herkennen, omdat bepaalde min of meer standaard behandelingen bij AF dan beter vermeden kunnen worden om verergering van AF type te voorkomen. Er zijn 3 verschillende klinische AF typen: paroxysmaal (enkel korte aanvallen van de ritmestoornis die spontaan over gaan), persisterend (aanvallen duren langer en gaan niet vanzelf over) en permanent (de arts beslist dat pogingen om normaal sinus ritme te herstellen geen zin meer hebben en de ritmestoornis wordt geaccepteerd). We hebben in dit proefschrift gekeken naar factoren die aan progressie (of verergering) van het AF type gerelateerd zijn. Op basis hiervan is een score ontwikkeld (de HATCH score) die kan voorspellen hoe groot de kans is dat een patiënt met paroxysmaal AF een verergering van AF type ondergaat.

Daarnaast is het van belang om de beste individuele behandelstrategie te kiezen. Immers, alle verschillende behandelingen die kunnen worden toegepast, kunnen weer bijwerkingen en complicaties geven. Het is daarom belangrijk om patiënten zo adequaat mogelijk te behandelen zonder ze bloot te stellen aan de gevaren van zinloze behandelingen. In het laatste deel van het proefschrift, worden enkele hartecho metingen beschreven die kijken naar de frequentie en snelheid van het bewegen van

de boezems. We hebben gevonden dat deze echo metingen sterk gerelateerd zijn aan de mate van elektrische storing in de boezems en daardoor zou kunnen aangeven hoe ver gevorderd de ritmestoornis is en of een bepaalde behandeling kans van slagen heeft.